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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author explains why she prefers the term "literacy animator" to "literacy educator." According to Oladumi Arigbede (1994), literacy animators view their role as assisting in the self-liberating development of people in the world who are struggling for a more meaningful life. In explaining the author's preference, the paper touches on violence against women, globalization, misappropriation of resources, male-dominated theory, education as competition, and multiple literacies. The intention is to be persuasive and provocative in order to stimulate dialogue, debate, and introspection on the purposes and actions of teachers of reading. (Contains 19 references.) (NKA)

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On Choosing to Be a Literacy Animator.

by Michelle Commeyras

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On Choosing to Be a Literacy Animator

Michelle Commeyras

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Abstract

In this commentary, the author explains why she prefers the term *literacy animator* to *literacy educator*. In explaining her preference, she touches on violence against women, globalization, misappropriation of resources, male-dominated theory, education as competition, and multiple literacies. Her intention is to be persuasive and provocative in order to stimulate dialogue, debate, and introspection on our purposes and actions as teachers of reading.

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"What would it cost each year to control major childhood diseases, halve child malnutrition, bring sanitation and safe water to every community, provide basic education for all children and make family planning and maternity services universally available worldwide?" asks Penelope Leach (1994, p. 172), noted psychologist and expert on child development, and author of a book on what society must do to put our children first. Leach estimates the cost at $25 billion (U.S.). That may be an astronomical sum, but it pales in comparison to the $400 billion spent each year by the tobacco industry in its worldwide promotion of cigarettes and smoking. The World Health Organization estimates that if current smoking trends continue, tobacco will be the leading cause of disease by the year 2020 and will be responsible for one in eight deaths. Seventy percent of those deaths will occur in developing countries. Why do we invest so much in something that is killing us and not enough to improve the lives of the world's children?

Winkleman (1998), writing on how battered women talk about school, notes that in the United States, "three out of four women are assaulted in their lifetimes. Domestic violence occurs in one out of every three American households" (p. 106). In 1994, for example, a rape or attempted rape occurred every 3.5 minutes in the United States, a figure derived from only those assaults that were reported to the police. Winkleman asks educators to think about the relationship between the school life of girls and the adult life of battered women. She believes that most teachers say nothing to girls and boys about the violence in their everyday or future lives, calling the lack of attention to violence against females the "evaded curriculum" (p. 107).

According to Swerdlow (1999) and other sources, the world's people speak about 6000 languages. But by the year 2010, Swerdlow asserts that only 3000 will remain in use. And English is now spoken to some degree by more than one-fifth of the world's population. Why? Globalization. As Zwingle and McNally (1999, p. 12) explain,

> Humans have been weaving commercial and cultural connections since before the first camel caravan ventured afield. In the 19th century the postal service, newspapers, transcontinental railroads, and great steam-powered ships wrought fundamental changes. Telegraph, telephone, radio, and television tied tighter and more intricate knots between the individuals and the wider world. Now computers, the Internet, cellular phones, cable TV, and cheaper jet transportation have accelerated and complicated these connections. Still the basic dynamics remain the same: Goods move. People move. Ideas move. And cultures change....

Throughout the world, people are concerned about the losses that will follow from globalization and the effects of dominant Western -- and particularly American -- influences on cultures worldwide. I, too, wonder about the cultural assault of McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Hollywood films, Nike, and the English language. Will such influences "flatten every cultural crease, producing, as one observer terms it, one big McWorld?" (Zwingle & McNally, 1999, pp. 12-13).

But what does this have to do with literacy? I suggest a great deal. The mismanagement and squandering of financial resources that denies basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, and education to children and their families is relevant to my work in literacy. Violence against girls and women is also relevant. Globalization's threat to cultural and linguistic diversity cannot, in my opinion, be divorced from teaching literacy. All this and more is central to the distinction I find between the terms *literacy animator* and *literacy educator*.

What Is a Literacy Animator?

I was introduced to the concept of literacy animator in Oladumi Arigbede's (1994) article on high illiteracy rates among women and school dropout rates among girls. According to Arigbede, literacy animators view their role as assisting in the self-liberating development of people in the world who are struggling for a more meaningful life. Animators are a family of deeply concerned and committed people whose gut-level rejection of mass human pauperization compels them to intervene on the side of the marginalized. Their motivation is not derived from a love of literacy as merely another technical life skill, and they accept that literacy is never culturally or ideologically neutral.

Arigbede writes from her experiences as an animator working with women and men in Nigeria. She believes that literacy animators have to make a clear choice about whose culture and whose ideology will be fostered among those with whom they work. Do literacy educators in the United States consider whether the instruction they

pursue conflicts with their students' traditional cultures or community, or fosters illiteracies in learners' first or home languages or dialects and in their orality?

Some approaches to literacy instruction represent an ideology of individualism, control, and competition. Consider, for example, the difference in values conveyed and represented when students engage in choral reading versus the practice of having one student read out loud to the group. To identify as a literacy animator is to choose the ideology of "sharing, solidarity, love, equity, co-operation with and respect of both nature and other human beings" (Arigbede, 1994, p. 19). Literacy pedagogy that matches the animator ideology works on maintaining the languages and cultures of millions of minority children who at present are being forced to accept the language and culture of the dominant group (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). It might lead to assessment that examines the performance outcomes of a community of literacy learners and the social significance of their uses of literacy, as opposed to measuring what an individual can do as a reader and writer on a standardized test. Shor (1993) describes literacy animators as problem-posing, community-based, dialogic educators. Do our teacher-education textbooks on reading and language arts promote the idea that teachers should explore problems from a community-based dialogic perspective?

Why, I wonder, was I not introduced to the concept of literacy animator in my undergraduate teacher-education courses? Why, I wonder, did I not come across the concept of literacy animator while pursuing a degree in critical and creative thinking? How did I miss the concept of literacy animator in my doctoral work on language and literacy studies? Why did I not encounter the concept of literacy animator during my years as an assistant professor studying gender, critical literacy, and research from a feminist perspective?

Probably because my preparation for teaching reading and the community of educators I belonged to were based primarily on a particular cultural and world perspective. For more than a decade I was schooled and immersed in a field of reading education where the great debates have been over whether to teach phonics and how children learn to decode text.

How I Became a Literacy Animator

Is it merely coincidence that upon returning to the United States after a year living and teaching in Botswana I came across Arigbede's article and the concept of the literacy animator? Since my experience in Botswana, I have made a deliberate effort to read work on literacy written by people who do not belong to the "first world." My colleagues at the University of Botswana were from China, Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, South Africa, Ethiopia, India, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Kenya, and England, as well as Botswana itself. Their discourse made reference to thinkers, writers, artists, politicians, and ideas that revealed to me the limitations of my education. My fluency in only one language -- English -- felt like a deficiency in a community where most everyone was fluent in two, three, or more languages. That I could survive and travel the world with my one language was an indicator of privilege, but in fact, I felt linguistically impoverished. And I was uncomfortable with my ignorance of other peoples' countries, cultures, and religions. The students I taught were from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Sierre Leone, and Swaziland, as well as Botswana. They knew more about the history, religions, and politics of the United States than I knew about even the simple geography of their countries.

In my reading after I returned from Botswana, I discovered that much of the literacy work being done in three-fourths of the world is directed toward adults. I became aware that a curious communication gap exists between those who concentrate on reading and language arts with children and those who concern themselves with adult literacy. My desire to learn about literacy from those writing from the three-fourths world (as opposed to the "third world") led me to new publications outlets. I learned about the concept of literacy animators in an adult education journal.

Whose Ideas Are Privileged and Promoted?

I returned to the United States to teach a new course on sociopolitical perspectives of literacy, wondering what international perspectives I was missing. The scholars who are most prominent in taking a critical perspective on narrow definitions of literacy are from the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Australia (e.g., Gee, 1996; Luke, 1995; Street, 1993). And the most-often cited and recognized critical literacy scholars are male, with the grandfather of them all being Paulo Freire. I find that those writing and working from the perspective of literacy animators receive secondary status because they do not focus their energies on theory -- as in binding together knowledge in a systematic, abstract fashion. Arigbede, for example, is an activist more than a theorist in the Western tradition.

Thinking about this reminds me of reading a challenge to the attribution of existentialist philosophy to Jean Paul Sartre. Fullbrook and Fullbrook (1998) argued that Sartre's writing life was so intertwined with that of Simone de Beauvoir that she must have played a role in conceptualizing existentialism. The evidence for this, they say, lies in her novels, where she embedded the philosophy of existentialism not in an abstract tome, but in storytelling.

In introducing a book on feminisms and critical pedagogy, Luke and Gore (1992) write that women academics are

expected to situate their writing with a "paternal signifier of 'real theory'" (p. 4). They cite French feminist Hélène Cixous, who wrote that "the moment women open their mouths -- women more often than men -- they are immediately asked whose name and from what theoretical standpoint they are speaking, who is their master and where are they coming from: they have, in short, to salute...and to show their identity papers" (cited in Luke & Gore, p. 12).

It is the literacy animator and feminist in me that wonders about these things. Whose writing gets privileged and promoted? Why don't we see theory and story as intertwined? What gets valued in literacy?

Neilsen (1994), writing about teaching in times of change, refers to Eisler's partnership model wherein social relations are based on linking, not ranking, on cooperation and harmony. She notes that in this model, diversity does not result in inequity; rather, it simply represents difference. Linking, cooperation, and harmony are the antithesis of the rhetoric in the United States that argues for increased education funding to keep us "competitive" in the world, meaning in reality that we wish to ensure that we maintain our position of economic and military superiority.

As a literacy animator I see the importance of education differently. I am drawn to Kamla Bhasin's contention that what the world needs today is a positive value -- love. "If our thoughts and actions are based on love, compassion, caring, we can subsist, live together peacefully in our family or on our globe. Without love we can only compete, mistrust, kill," explains Bhasin (1994). She sees literacy and education as promoting values such as ambition -- a desire to get ahead of others -- with the result that people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied. Ambition is certainly what gets valued in the United States through the current heavy emphasis placed on performance in norm-referenced standardized reading tests. And the testing-based accountability movement is creating increasingly frustrated teachers, students, administrators, parents, and politicians.

Bhasin (1994) points out further that "educated" people are not necessarily more compassionate, caring, nurturing, or interested in sharing. She tells of a man who was more afraid of educated men than of wild animals: "He said almost 100 percent of those around him who were educated, were exploiters, oppressors; they were people who took more than their share of resources" (p. 7). She goes on to give examples of what he meant. Populations in rich and largely educated countries, particularly those of the Western world, consume the overwhelming majority of the world's resources. They pollute more. They sell weapons and fund wars. Their consumption results in exploitation and oppression in less wealthy and less educated nations. Bhasin asks us how many illiterate people have done these things. The world we have today, filled with suffering, inequity, and injustice, is in large part the creation of literate, educated men from developed nations.

Countering the Autonomous Model of Literacy

I intend to spend the remainder of my teaching career exploring ways in which I can be a literacy animator as opposed to a literacy educator. The term *literacy educator* seems too closely tied to the autonomous model of literacy defended by Gough (1995) in his critique of "the new literacy." Literacy animators and those who support the notion of the new literacy (Willinsky, 1990) argue that if one expects literacy learning to assist marginalized grassroots communities in performing specific tasks that represent their own interests, then it is necessary to engage them directly in ways that address complex social, economic, and political problems. Gough argues that literacy can and should be divorced from social and political considerations, influences, and dimensions. Following this model, teaching literacy is predicated on the idea that readers and writers "can be separated from the society that gives meaning to their uses of literacy" (Street, 1993). This results in treating the cognitive processes employed in decoding and comprehending as distinct from social and cultural contexts.

I no longer think of literacy as a neutral skill or technology that can be learned irrespective of specific sociopolitical realities. Writing, for example, can facilitate falsification. Bledsoe and Robey (1993) provide an account of how the Mende of Sierra Leone use literacy in some contexts to enhance communication and social integration but in others for purposes of secrecy and separation. For the Mende, whose tribal language bears the same name as the tribe, the most important benefit of literacy in Arabic (one of the languages of power in Sierra Leone, with special ritual applications because it is the language of Islam) derives from teaching it. The Mende word *karamoko* means "one who can read." A karamoko is a teacher or diviner (generally if not exclusively male, since Arabic literacy is largely a male prerogative) who uses his knowledge of Arabic writing to earn income, gain prestige, and recruit apprentice learners. Writing and reading skills can be withheld or divulged strategically by the karamoko to gain power and dependents. Children generally live in the karamoko's household and work under strict discipline. The karamokos find it advantageous to draw out the learning process as long as possible. Initially, the karamoko teaches the pronunciation and graphic representations of Arabic words, withholding the meaning until the student has memorized both.

As a literacy animator, I hope to be attuned to the ways in which promoting literacy as a neutral skill inadvertently results in secrecy and separation. Writers can purposefully make a text ambiguous or use obscure vocabulary. And readers can construe any number of interpretations emanating from their particular belief system or ideological perspective. Bledsoe and Robey (1993) propose that the literal meanings of words may be less important than the negotiated claims about their meanings. It is this process of negotiation over meaning that I

regard as impossible to treat as a neutral cognitive accomplishment.

I no longer think of literacy acquisition as necessarily leading to economic development and better social consequences. Historically, widespread acquisition of literacy has more often followed than preceded development. I disagree with William S. Gray's (1960) presumption that "reading is an indispensable means of communication in a civilized world" (p. 1088). What does Gray presume in his mention of "a civilized world" -- or, for that matter, by the word "reading"? I reject the idea that "as groups advance in civilization, their need for and use of reading increase" (Gray, p. 1088). Rather, what happens is that ways of reading change or expand. The idea that an increase in literacy and education results in some superior civilization reminds me of Bhasin's tribal elder -- the one who was more afraid of educated men than of wild animals. What if we accept that to be civilized is to love, cooperate, share, listen, and respect? Then it follows that civilization exists with peoples who have all manner of literacies -- from oral to visual to written.

Consider the !Kung people, who in being resettled from the Kalahari Desert, are being forced to abandon their traditional way of life. Morwe (1998) explains that the Botswana National Literacy Programme has not been a significant experience for the !Kung because it fails to build and weave approaches and methods around the peoples' indigenous literacy. They lived literacy -- for them, their traditional way of life involved a lot of literacy. They would hunt by tracking wild animals, differentiating and distinguishing among species just by reading their tracks. They would estimate the time and period of the track. They could also identify the types of animals likely to be found in the area on the basis of the vegetation. They would not lose a targeted object because their geography of locality was very good. They could read landscapes (p. 6).

Perhaps Gray would recognize that the !Kung had their own version of literacy to construct meaning in their own civilization. What ways of reading do our students have that we have yet to recognize as reading? I propose that all peoples have literacy. The educational concern then becomes identifying the additional literacies that they want, and why. And when we introduce new literacies, how do we acknowledge and preserve existing literacies? As a literacy animator, these are the questions I now try to keep foremost in my mind.

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